

## I. Research Proposal Cover Page

**Title of Proposed Research**

Unearthing Gaps: Exploring the Impact of Archival Practices on Public History Representation

**Abstract (less than 250 words)**

Archives hold many artifacts, documents, and ephemera that make up the primary sources used by researchers and historians to piece together history as we understand it. It is important to note that every archive, no matter its size and whether it is public or private, is integral to the public's perception of history. The information that they provide often ends up being used as the primary sources for sharing history, from popular books to museum exhibits and local history websites. However, the accuracy of that history is contingent on those archives possessing materials that represent a story as completely as possible within the field or niche that archive is dedicated to.

It is by using a survey of several archives that this study aims to gauge what role archival inventory practices play in that archive's ability to accurately portray public history. How often and how deeply do these archives perform collection inventories and what kinds of information do they gather from their inventory practices? How well do archives understand the completeness of their collections and do they actively seek out materials to fill gaps present within their collections?

| Project Start Date   | Project Completion Date  |
|--|--------------------------|
|  |                          |
| Amount Requested   | Proposal Submission Date |
| <b>Principal Investigators' Names &amp; Affiliations**</b> |                          |
| (Redacted for privacy), USF Librarian                      |                          |
| (Redacted for privacy), USF Librarian                      |                          |
| Mischa Johns, USF Librarian                                |                          |
| (Redacted for privacy), USF Librarian                      |                          |

## **II. Statement of Need & Significance of Study**

### **Needs Assessment (Research Problem)**

This study addresses a critical gap in understanding how archival inventory practices influence the accuracy of public history narratives. Archives play a pivotal role in shaping our historical knowledge, yet their effectiveness in contributing to that role relies on their inventory methods. Many archives face gaps in their collections, resulting in incomplete narratives that often overlook marginalized voices and experiences. Despite the significant role that inventory practices play in historical documentation, there remains a lack of insight into the specific methods employed by these institutions.

By closely examining archival inventory practices, this study aims to investigate the relationship between them and their impact on public history. It will identify barriers that hinder archives from fully representing public history and pinpointing undervalued or under-documented areas. By contributing to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding archival work, this study seeks to empower archives of all sizes and audiences to serve their communities better.

This inquiry is essential for historians, researchers, and community members who rely on archives for accurate and inclusive storytelling. The insights generated from this research will be actionable, providing archives with concrete recommendations to improve their inventory practices and, consequently, their representation of public history. Ultimately, it aims to foster a richer historical narrative that reflects the diverse experiences and voices that comprise our past.

### **Literature Review**

Current literature emphasizes the vital importance and utility of adequately maintaining inventory in archives. Richard Berner laid out a robust framework for archival inventory construction in 1982, grounded in recommendations from the Society of American Archivists. While this framework has been largely adopted, it has not resolved every issue faced by the profession. Cary and Hackbart-Dean (2019) identify one increasingly challenging problem: the backlogs of unprocessed and un-inventoried materials that many archives contend

with. These backlogs often pass from one archivist to another, causing materials to languish long after they are received. This issue is compounded by the inherent resource constraints such as time, money, and manpower. All of which are necessary for effective inventory practices. Consequently, various factors, including limited staffing and funding, lead to the sidelining of items - sometimes for years - awaiting proper processing.

While it may be easy to dismiss backlogs or other obstacles to inventory practices as expected parts of the profession, the ramifications of such lapses are profound. Haunton and Salzedo (2020) articulate the significant role archives play in public history, serving as primary sources for historical narratives. Yet, Weldon (1982) highlights that archives often rank low on the priority list for funding and other essential resources, which undermines their capacity to support accurate public history representation. This gap is further illustrated by Janak (2020), whose exploration of "null history" reveals how an incomplete archive can distort the historical narratives constructed from its materials. If materials are not properly inventoried or are difficult to locate, the distinction between an archive missing a key document and one that has it but cannot find it becomes virtually nonexistent.

Moreover, Prud'homme and Compton (2020) delve into the current inventory practices within U.S. archives, revealing that many institutions still rely on outdated methods that lack scalability. Their research suggests that while there are best practices recommended in archival literature, the actual implementation is inconsistent, and many repositories continue to struggle with effective inventory management. Rylance (2006) adds to this discourse by examining the intangible aspects of archives, indicating that traditional inventory approaches may not fully capture the value and significance of archival materials, particularly those that represent less tangible cultural heritage.

Looking beyond issues of accessibility and usability, an archival institution has an obligation to preserve and make public all aspects of history and serve the entire community that it services. Jimmerson (2007) points out that an archive has more than a necessity to preserve as many aspects of their service area as possible, it has a duty to do so in the name of social justice and accountability for future generations of lawmakers, activists,

and historians. Ensuring that an archive accurately reflects the voice of the audience it serves is crucial to the integrity of the institution's mission.

Therefore, this research proposal aims to fill these gaps by exploring innovative strategies for inventory management that are adaptable to various archival environments. By synthesizing findings from previous studies and addressing their shortcomings, this proposal will not only contribute to the field of archival science but also provide practical solutions to enhance the role of archives in preserving and presenting history accurately.

## **Significance of the Study**

This research highlights the critical connection between archival inventory practices and the representation of public history. The study aims to ensure that diverse and inclusive narratives are preserved and presented by investigating how effectively archives catalog their collections and identify gaps. Understanding these practices will not only enhance the accuracy of historical accounts but also promote a more comprehensive public understanding of the past. This will ultimately foster a richer societal narrative that encompasses varied perspectives and experiences.

## **III. Research Design**

### **Research Goals and Questions**

The purpose of this study is to better understand what role archive inventory practices have in public history and what some common factors between existing archives' management are. Figuring out what the trends of current archives are through how they determine their inventory's needs and how they handle maintenance are important results that will speak volumes on what parts of inventory practices are prioritized and neglected. The success of this project will be able to explain any common denominators that could be the culprit of preventing communities from being provided an accurate telling of history. Through holding interviews and providing survey questions for archivists, the research team will be able to not only invite further discussions for survey answers with archivists but also make the experience more individualistic by speaking

one-on-one. The research will focus on identifying gaps in representation and recommending strategies for more inclusive archival practices. Specifically, this research seeks to investigate the following questions:

RQ1: How frequently do archives conduct collection inventories?

RQ2: What types of information are gathered during inventory practices?

RQ3: How common and how large are processing backlogs?

RQ4: Do archives turn away materials because they can not process them?

RQ5: What factors do archives use to prioritize what materials get inventoried?

## **Assumptions**

This research is based upon several assumptions regarding archival practices and their impact on public history. It assumes that archives play a crucial role in shaping public history narratives and that inventory practices directly affect the accuracy and completeness of these collections. The study assumes that archivists aim to create inclusive collections but that institutional policies or donor preferences can influence which materials are prioritized or collected and result in biased narratives presented to their communities. Additionally, this project supposes that through using technology archivists will enhance inventory management and result in more efficient practices and fewer gaps in collections. Finally, the research assumes that respondents will provide honest and accurate accounts of their inventory practices which will indicate whether unreliable practices are widespread. These assumptions will be examined throughout the study, revealing a more accurate relationship between current archival practices and representations of public history.

## **Method**

This study employs a mixed-methods research design to explore the relationship between archival inventory practices and their impact on public history narratives. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques will provide a comprehensive understanding of current practices and identify gaps in representation within archival collections.

A survey will be sent out to a diverse range of archival institutions during the first week. The intention is

to include public and private institutions as well as institutions with small and large collections. This approach aims to capture a broad spectrum of practices and challenges that different types of archives encounter. The survey uses Likert scales and categorical response options. These quantitative question types will allow statistical comparisons and patterns to emerge across different institutional types and sizes. For 4-6 weeks the participants will have the opportunity to take the survey. Afterwards, qualitative interviews will be conducted with key archival staff members from various institutions for 6-8 weeks while working around the participants' schedules. These interviews will provide deeper insights into the motivations behind inventory practices, challenges faced in representation, and strategies for overcoming barriers. The goal is to allow respondents to share their experiences, perceptions, and the influence of external factors, such as donor pressures or institutional policies.

In summary, this mixed-methods research design will facilitate a comprehensive exploration of archival inventory practices and their significance in shaping public history narratives. By combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, the study seeks to highlight the complexities of archival work and promote strategies for improvement in representation and inclusivity. The aim is to generate actionable insights that will inform archival practices, ultimately enhancing the representation of marginalized voices in public history. Based on the findings, recommendations will be developed, guiding archives in adopting more inclusive and effective inventory methods.

## **Analysis**

Responses to the survey will be analyzed during the last two weeks of the project to pick out trends in the collections of the archives surveyed. The collected data should allow an understanding of the depth and frequency of inventory practices for the surveyed institutions. Interview responses will additionally be analyzed, given keywords associated with a number of topics including the interviewee's confidence in their inventory practices, need, or lack of need, for additional resources, and impact their archive currently has versus the impact they believe it can have. Combined, this quantitative and qualitative data should help paint a picture of

how current inventory practices affect the ability these institutions have in telling the widest, most accurate story that their collections can tell.

## **IV. Project Resources**

### **Personnel**

The project's authors, Kryslynn Collazo, Alex Ibarra, Mischa Johns, and Hailey Morrow will be the primary personnel gathering and collating data from the surveys, conducting interviews, and analyzing the results after the data gathering is complete.

### **Timelines**

The surveys are expected to be made available for 4-6 weeks in order to give ample time for submissions with an additional 6-8 weeks allowed for scheduling and holding interviews with willing participants. Data collation and analysis will begin during the project's first 10-14 weeks and an additional 2 weeks is expected for the final data analysis to be completed. The total timeline for the project is expected to take 12-16 weeks.

### **Budget**

Given the other duties of the project authors, one day of work per week is expected from each member and so salaries for each are expected to cost \$2,800 which totals to \$11,200 for the team overall. The researchers already have a majority of the equipment needed to complete the research project but will need access to online survey tools for the implementation and distribution of the survey. Given the scope of the project, Survey Monkey has been chosen for the implementation and will cost \$25 per user per month, totaling \$400. To account for items such as online data storage, office supplies, and any other indirect costs associated with the project, an additional \$2,000 is added to the budget for a total of \$13,600.

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|-----------------|-----------------|
| <b>Salaries</b> | <b>\$11,200</b> |
|-----------------|-----------------|

|                              |                 |
|------------------------------|-----------------|
| <b>Survey Program Access</b> | <b>\$400</b>    |
| <b>Miscellaneous Costs</b>   | <b>\$2,000</b>  |
| <b>Total</b>                 | <b>\$13,600</b> |

## **V. References**

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**VI. Appendix**

## **Archive Inventory Practices Survey**

USF Research in Archives Design

(Names redacted for privacy)

### **Introduction**

This survey is part of the University of South Florida's Research in Archives Design research project, or RAD. RAD is attempting to understand how inventory practices affect the archive's ability to tell local history.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey and if you have any questions or comments please email us at [RADteam@USF.edu](mailto:RADteam@USF.edu)

All survey responses will be kept confidential and no private information will be collected.

### **Demographic Questions**

1. What state is your institution located in?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Is your institution public or private?
  - a. Public
  - b. Private
  - c. Other, if so please explain  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. How many items, approximately, are in your archival collection?
  - a. Less than 100 items
  - b. 100 - 499 items
  - c. 500 - 999 items
  - d. 1,000 - 4,999 items
  - e. 5,000 - 9,999 items
  - f. 10,000 - 49,999 items
  - g. 50,000 or more items

### **Survey Questions**

1. How much of your archival collections are currently inventoried?
  - a. 1% - 20%
  - b. 21% - 40%
  - c. 41% - 60%
  - d. 61% - 80%
  - e. 81% - 100%
2. How do you prioritize the inventory process?
  - a. Vulnerability
  - b. Demand by Users or Projects
  - c. Enduring Value
  - d. Content/Media Type

- e. First Come, First Served
- f. Other, if so please explain

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- 3. How often does your institution perform any kind of inventory?
  - a. Almost never
  - b. Once every few years
  - c. Once per year
  - d. More than once per year
- 4. Is demographic information (such as race, sex, disability status, sexual orientation, etc.) part of your inventory practices?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Other, if so please explain

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- 5. Does your institution seek out materials to fill perceived gaps in your collection?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
- 6. Do you have restrictions on the type of content allowed into the archive?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No

If so, what are the restrictions?

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- 7. Do donors influence how or what materials are selected to include in your archive?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No

If so, please explain.

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- 8. Does the archive lend original documents for research or exhibition use?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
- 9. Does your archive have regularly scheduled purges?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No

If so, who decides on the frequency and depth of these purges?

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- 10. Have any materials been reconsidered or refused because of privacy or security concerns?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No

If so, please explain.

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- 11. How does the archive deal with space limitations?
  - a. By digitizing and then throwing away physical copies
  - b. By not accepting materials until there is available space
  - c. Other, if so please explain

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- 12. Who primarily uses your archive's resources?
  - a. Researchers

- b. Students
- c. General Public
- d. Other, if so please explain

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13. How much of your collection is available to the public to explore online?

- A. All materials in our collection are available online
- B. Some or selected materials are available online
- C. No materials are available online, and we do not plan on adding this function
- D. No materials are available online, but we would like to add this function